

DREAMING SPIRES  
and  
TEEMING TOWERS

*The Character of Cambridge*

*by*

THOMAS SHARP

LIVERPOOL UNIVERSITY PRESS



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## PREFATORY NOTE

In 1962, the author was commissioned by the Town and Country Planning Committee of the Cambridgeshire County Council to prepare a report on the character and scale of the centre of Cambridge, with the object of serving as a guide for intending developers and for the Planning Authorities when considering development and redevelopment proposals within that area. These papers, which constituted his report, are now published, by the authority of the Committee, for general information and discussion: but at this stage they express his own opinions only, and not those of the County Planning Committee as a whole or of its members individually.

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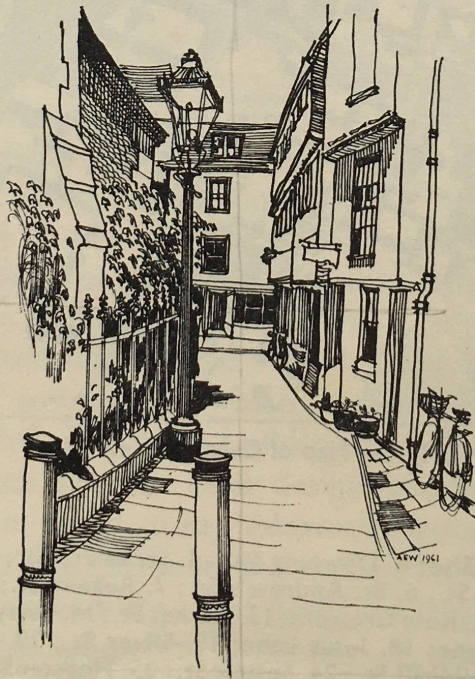






Fig. 1—Map of Central Cambridge

References: A. New Museums Site; B. Downing Site; 1. St. John's St.; 2. Trinity St.; 3. King's Parade; 4. Trumpington St.; 5. Sidney St.; 6. St. Andrew's St.; 7. Regent St.; 8. Hills Rd.; 9. Bridge St.; 10. Magdalene St.; 11. Green St.; 12. Rose Crescent; 13. Market St.; 14. Petty Cury; 15. St. Edward's Passage; 16. Bene't St.; 17. Botolph Lane; 18. Jesus Lane; 19. Silver St.; 20. Market Hill; 21. Peas Hill; 22. Wheeler St.; 23. Guildhall St.; 24. Sussex St.; 25. Hobson St.; 26. Pembroke St.



# DREAMING SPIRES and TEEMING TOWERS

## The Character of Cambridge

by THOMAS SHARP

### I

IT is sometimes said that Cambridge is now the only example in Britain of the true university-town. It is held to be so in view of the alleged disruption of Oxford. The Vice-Chancellor of the University expressed this opinion in a recent letter to *The Times*. It is not, in my view, a sound opinion. It ignores the existence of Durham and St. Andrews. It grossly over-states the changes that this century has brought to Oxford—changes that are, indeed, much the same in some respects as those that have come about in Cambridge. Nevertheless, if Cambridge is not the only example of its kind in Britain, it still remains (though to a steadily diminishing degree) an example of a true university-town in the sense of being a special kind of place whose physical as well as social character is in a large part determined by the presence of the University within it—instead of being, as most other towns and cities with universities are, merely places which have those institutions within their boundaries in the way that they have factories, houses, shops, gasworks and railway stations.

This special physical character of the true university-town mainly arises from the physical interpenetration of the two parts, university buildings mingling with town buildings and town buildings with university buildings. As a result of this interpenetration and intermingling the varied, lively, intricate, complicated, dramatically diversified townscape, which is the characteristic of the true university-town, is created. The town buildings and the university buildings foil each other. They foil each other in their design, materials and scale. The town buildings are generally in small units, informally associated even though they stand together in a street. The university and college buildings are larger and more highly organised. The scale and organised design of large buildings is emphasised and set off by the juxtaposition or proximity of smaller buildings. Grouped exclusively together, large buildings to some extent cancel each other out. A nice association with smaller less-organised buildings enhances their scale and design. And, complementally, the larger more formal buildings enhance the liveliness of



the smaller-unit buildings in their informal relation to each other. Both of these forms of interplay are given rich expression in the university-town.

The same thing happens through the materials of the different buildings. University and college buildings will often be in stone—and if some in Cambridge are in brick the very scale of their brickiness is sufficiently different from that of the places where brick is the material in the town streets for it, to some degree, to suggest something of a different material. The town's street-buildings, in contrast, will often be of very varied materials, small units of different coloured brickwork among painted surfaces showing a variety of widely different colours or subtly differing tints.

In addition to these differences of scale and material, there is another difference which is at least as important as they. This is the difference in form—in plan-form. College buildings are generally arranged in a succession of courts or quadrangles of varying sizes and architectural character: and not only each college, but each court within each college, generally has a strong sense of being a fully enclosed space, the links between the different courts in each college being often reticent and to unfamiliar eyes obscure. The necessarily flowing configurations of the town streets are in marked contrast to this. Whether they be wide or narrow, straight or curving, the streets, in their elongation and continuity, are dramatically different from the squarer more finite forms of the courts. Moving through a college gateway, inward from street to court, or outward from court to street, is to experience a strong sense of environmental change, a change almost to a different kind of physical world. And this feeling is, of course, strengthened by the quietness of the courts in contrast to the loud busyness of the streets outside.

\* \* \*

It will probably be agreed that that, in a summary way, suggests something of the essential physical character that is implied in describing a place as a 'university-town'. How far does modern Cambridge possess these characteristics? And, insofar as it still possesses them, to what degree are they being modified in the rebuilding which has been undertaken in recent years, or threatened by that which has been canvassed for the future?

It must be said at once that Cambridge has suffered much in its character as a university-town in the course of the last century.

Even before that it was somewhat different from what might be described as the ideal norm in one major respect. Historically, the interpenetration of university and town has been a good deal less than complete here. Instead of a general intermingling, there has been, from early days, a considerable degree of separation—or perhaps more accurately of separateness—between the two kinds of buildings. The early college foundations mainly clustered in a wedge between the river and the back of the town's buildings lining St. John's Street and Trinity Street, with only a short frontage of St. John's College and the gateway to Trinity



impinging directly on to those streets; and, besides this, three separated colleges on the far side of the other main town street (Sidney Street—St. Andrew's Street), with another beyond the river at Magdalene Bridge. All the area between these converging streets was town territory, with only Corpus Christi and Pembroke Colleges on the inner side of the triangle, and even they on the very edge of it, merely on the opposite side of the street from the rest of the colleges in that locality. And so it continued down to the end of the 18th century. The configuration of the town-centre at that time was still that major wedge of colleges, now extended, on the west; a minor broken wedge on the east (with Sidney Sussex established as the fourth college there); and all the triangle between the converging streets occupied by town buildings of various sorts, houses, shops, churches, workshops and the rest.

It was not until the nineteenth century that college and university impingement of this central triangle of the town began. It began early in the century with the establishment of Downing College in the middle of the triangle, far out; and, much later, after the middle of the century, with the lamentable intrusion of the sinister Caius frontage into Trinity Street, and the establishment of the first University teaching buildings on the 'New Museums' site on the north side of Downing Street. Since then, and particularly in the course of the present century, the impingement has intensified to a degree which has had a most marked effect on the character of the town. It has still not been much by way of interpenetration. The only major interpenetration of college into town-centre during this time has been a further Caius incursion, the savaging of Rose Crescent, and the less brutal but still regrettable intrusion into the market place. The main impingement has been by way of encirclement rather than penetration. With the enormous intensification almost to solidity of the buildings on the 'New Museums' side of Downing Street, and the establishment of the hardly less intensive concentration of newer science buildings on the south side (the 'Downing site'), the town-centre has become completely hemmed in by college and university buildings. Since the town itself has more than doubled its population in these sixty years, its needs in shops, offices and similar social provisions have also increased. Hemmed in on its boundaries, the town-centre has had to gain its additional floor-space by intensive site-coverage and increased height.

All this has produced a great change in the scale and character of this part of the town. People still sometimes describe Cambridge streets as those of a market-town. That is part of the myth which suggests that the town is now the only true university-town. They are no longer so. Because of the narrowness of the streets in relation to the height of the buildings lining them, some parts of central Cambridge must, indeed, have had a greater-than-market-town scale for a very long time. Now in size, if not in their character, the buildings which press and crowd on these central streets have a scale which belongs to a medium-large city. In its near-uniformity of over-great building height in relation to width of street, and in the lack of contrasting open places (the only openings in the street pattern being the obscured market-place and, to a lesser degree King's Parade;



town-Cambridge in this respect, in the interplay between narrow street wide street and open place, having always been markedly deficient)—because of these conditions, the scale of central Cambridge has now become oppressive. The town-centre has become over-solid. And much of the rebuilding that has made it over-solid has meant the loss of the liveliness and foiling character that the earlier displaced small-unit frontages had. The over-solid character of these parts has produced a lack of variety, a lack of contrast. Town-Cambridge (and therefore university-town-Cambridge) has lost even more during this present century than it did in the 19th.

Great as these town changes have been they have been less in effect than those caused by the new University buildings. Chief among these have been the enormous concentrations of university (as distinct from college) buildings which have blocked the possibility of the town-centre's southward expansion. The New Museums and Downing sites are deplorable in their high crowding over-development by dull buildings. And if their worst effects are internal within their own sites, their external effects have been sufficient to kill stone-dead the streets which have to bear the weight of the buildings put against them.

The plain fact is that Cambridge is no longer as good a university-town as writers of guide-books and Vice-Chancellors are apt to claim. It is sad to have to say so: but saying it is not only a matter of professional honesty; it is important for the sake of the town. It is important because it is time it was realised that Cambridge has already reached a stage in its history when its boasted university-town character has been reduced to something that is perilously close to vanishing point. If what remains of that character is to be saved, it is necessary to face reality and brush away the flattering myth-mists which obscure what has been happening for quite a long time now and what is still happening today.

\* \* \*

For what is happening today and what seems threatened for tomorrow is quite as bad as anything that has happened in the last hundred years, including the worst onslaughts of Caius. Even within recent months there has been completed one of the most damaging pieces of 'development' that university-town-Cambridge has ever suffered. And it has been undertaken on behalf of a college (though not for college purposes—except the financial ones) and approved by the Royal Fine Art Commission.

At the junction of St. Andrew's Street and Emmanuel Street there stood until some five or six years ago a collection of town buildings which possessed exactly that quality of contrast to the larger and more formal ranges of near-by college and university buildings which has been described as one of the essential constituents of the university-town. The hundred-yard-long frontage to St. Andrew's Street, between Christ's Lane and Emmanuel Street, was occupied by an extraordinarily varied collection of mostly 18th and early 19th century domestic buildings. They were of comparatively short frontages, with a much



broken building line, and were almost wildly varied in height. While some of the buildings were of considerable architectural distinction in the narrowest sense, the general collection could not be claimed to be so. It was a bit of a jumble. Nevertheless, the whole frontage made a valuable contribution to the university-town architectural scene; and it did so particularly because, with its broken form and its domestic character, it occupied the space between two colleges. The return frontage, that to Emmanuel Street, was different again—very different. It comprised a fifty-yard-long run of eight cottage-type houses, two storeys high with dormers in a tiled mansard roof. Their facades were plastered and colour-washed. In their continuity of similar windows in both wall and roof they presented a modest uniformity that was in marked contrast to the scale and formality of the college across the narrow street and the scale and jumbled street-and-roof-lines of the buildings round the corner.

Here was a remaining instance of town-Cambridge juxtaposed to university-Cambridge to constitute a significant incident of university-town-Cambridge: an instance of essential interplay between constituents which was already by no means as common in the town as it should be. What has happened to it? The whole considerable complex, and its contribution to the Cambridge scene, has been destroyed. In its place, in the place of all this small-unit varied foil to large buildings, there have been erected two large-unit buildings; one, Prudential House, of overbearing bulk and overbearing and unvarying pomposity; the other, Bradwells Court, incongruously lower, like a shivering orphan nephew beside it, but still, in its unbroken large-unit frontage, too like the college next door to contribute anything but additional dullness to the scene. So now, in the last year or two, another of the by no means too plentiful remaining parts of university-town-Cambridge has been destroyed. In 1959, Cambridge still suffered 'development' as blind and mistaken as anything it has had to suffer in earlier years.

\* \* \*

In order to assess the present situation in more particular detail, and to attempt to suggest from that assessment what the future policy towards possible rebuilding should be, it may be helpful to make a brief analysis of the various street-scenes as they now are.

Take the outstandingly good parts first, to counter what may have been thought to be an over-severe impression of the whole.

*Trinity Street—St. John's Street* is one of the most beautiful streets in England. It is not only so because of the architectural excellence of many of its buildings both in themselves and in their relation to each other, but also because of its form and alignment. From its junction with King's Parade and St. Mary's Street, Trinity Street flows down in a long slow curve to where the shorter, quicker reverse curve of St. John's Street's short continuation provides a perfect completion, an exact foil, in alignment. The two ends, Caius buildings and its



opposing frontage at one end, and the over-open new St. John's buildings at the other, are the least good parts. But all the middle parts have the perfect character for their situation. The small-unit frontages have a most telling variety—old red brickwork with white-painted window framing, colour-washed plaster, painted brick, half-timber and plaster. They make a rich and diversified street scene. By great good fortune the best run of buildings is on the concave side of the street, where, to the inward movement along the curve in each direction, it unfolds itself progressively in the best tradition of good townscape. The outward progression, too, is nicely contained in the northerly direction where the reverse curve displays Trinity Chapel and St. John's gateway on one side of the street, and, on the other, the natural foil of inward leaning trees. And the outward progression in the other direction provides one of the great moments of university-town Cambridge, when the narrow street suddenly, and without preparation, opens out into the contrasting width of King's Parade, displaying the finest range of all Cambridge street-side college and University buildings, set beyond grass and finely foiled by a splendidly casual tree.

*King's Parade* is also a noble street. It is principally so, of course, by virtue of that range of University and college buildings. But the town buildings on the other side play their important part too. Like so many important ranges of town-buildings in this kind of scene, they are of no great architectural distinction in themselves (though many of them have much charm). But in their varying façades, varying heights, varying (though small-unit) frontages and various-coloured materials, they have a liveliness in their informal association, and a contrasting scale in relation to the University and college buildings,\* which give them a collective importance in this famous street that is far beyond their individual merits.

The southward curve of King's Parade is nicely punctuated, where it runs into *Trumpington Street*, by St. Catharine's and Corpus Christi Colleges, facing each other across the street. There is then a short run of domestic buildings and the useful vertical punctuation of the tower of Emmanuel Congregational Church,† with Pembroke on the other side of the street and Peterhouse and the Fitzwilliam Museum (facing cottagey frontages) beyond. And, after that, with the exception of the stretch fronted by the unattractive Addenbrooke's Hospital, all the length of Trumpington Road is diversified by tall trees and small and tall houses—by far the best of all the entrances to (or exits from) the town.

In this long length from St. John's Street, by Trinity Street, King's Parade and Trumpington Street out to Trumpington Road, Cambridge is splendidly

\* In mass, seeming (if not actually being) bigger than most of the University and college buildings facing them, partly because of the position of the roadway, and partly because of the lowness of the King's College screen.

† Cambridge, on the whole, is not very fortunate in its skyline. Its spires and towers are mostly not very good and not very tellingly placed. This one, though not beautiful, contributes some interest to the skyline in this place. Caius tower with the most important position in the town at the head of King's Parade, contributes only distress. One other, however, makes a tremendous contribution where it is badly needed—the tower and spire of the Roman Catholic Church, which is the one redeeming feature in the dreary length of Regent Street and Hills Road, and is also important to Lensfield Road, Gonville Place and Parker's Piece.



displayed. Here is the very essence of the true university-town. Here is something that no one in shop, office, house, college or University congregation should be allowed to destroy or impair.

The other of these main roads which converge towards Magdalene Bridge presents some very different kinds of townscape. *Sidney Street* as far south as Market Street still has something of a true university-town character: and it could have more if measures were taken to redeem its lack of colour\*. It is somewhat dull, and its buildings seem over-high for a narrow street of this length: but it has a certain quality, a variety of building, which would be in the true tradition were it better displayed, and its gentle curve gives it an appropriate containment. But if this part of the street has some valuable character, its continuations have none. The further part from Market Street to Petty Cury has suffered such 'improvement' in the 1930's and in the last year or two that it has nothing to do now with university-town Cambridge—a run of commercial palazzos on one side, and monumental Cotswold boots-and-shoes manor-houses on the other. Beyond the turn there is Christ's golden gateway and St. Andrew's Church facing it: then the calamity of Prudential House which has already been described, followed by Emmanuel College and one of the dreariest streets in southern England, the long, sad, characterless length of *St. Andrew's Street*—*Regent Street*—*Hills Road*, dragging itself out painfully to its dim vanishing point. If King's Parade—Trumpington Street is a street to save, here is a street that only strong measures† can redeem.

The northward continuation of these converged main streets is in Bridge Street and Magdalene Street. Until the 1930's, *Bridge Street* met *Sidney Street* and *St. John's Street* in a narrowly enclosed junction. Although the old buildings which St. John's College removed to obtain their new ones were good of their foiling kind, some well-contrived opening-out of the junction here would have been justified not only for traffic purposes but to provide a dramatic release of space after the confinement of the entering streets. Alas, the opening-out was not well-contrived and was too long pursued; and now the junction has no significant form at all. Most of the west part of the street has gone; and though the east side contains buildings that still make a useful contribution to the scene, most of the university-town character of the street has been lost beyond repair.

The street beyond the river, *Magdalene Street*, provides not only an architectural but a conceptual contrast. Here, in an exemplary way, character has been saved. Magdalene College and its architect, Mr. David Roberts, deserve the gratitude of Cambridge for having shown here that the university need not destroy the university-town. The old town-buildings on the west side of the street, which were once threatened with demolition to provide college extension, have recently been adapted to college purposes with little or no change to their external

\* One of the happiest ways of enlivening a run of what may, perhaps, for the sake of brevity, be called 'Georgian-type' façades (of which *Sidney Street* has a good many) is the white painting of window reveals. It is odd how little there is of this in Cambridge.

† Such as some close-in bridge-building athwart it, to shut it out?



appearance. Though now part of the college, they continue, in the painted plaster, the varying street-line, the varying heights, the broken roof-lines of their small-unit frontages, to make their essential contribution to the richness and diversity of the town. Here, at last, is a modern development which can whole-heartedly and gratefully be praised.\*

\*   \*   \*

These are the qualities of the main streets, the two converging streets and their continuation, which together, in their alignments, significantly and symbolically take on the configuration of a somewhat battered tuning fork. Besides them, there are the cross-streets running in between.

It may be well to list first those of these remaining streets that still retain something of their university-town character, and then dispose rapidly of the painful list of those that do not.

*Green Street* has domestic buildings (somewhat lacking colour) on a pleasant, slow curve.

*Rose Crescent's* concave shopping precinct remains an architectural refuge from the market place, in spite of the Caius buildings on the convex side.

*Market Street*, narrow, high-built and of little architectural quality, is still redeemable through the moderate-unit lengths of its frontages.

*Petty Cury* is sadly less interesting than it once was and still should be, but it still has its important value as a university-town street.

*St. Edward's Passage*, an insignificant little opening in the King's Parade frontage, ending in a small churchyard with shrubs, would be negligible if the rest of the streets were as they should be; but now that so much else has gone, it has become almost important.

*Bene't Street*, with its mixed architecture and its striking configuration (Friar House coming in across the short street-picture beyond a small open space) is a grateful foil to King's Parade.

*Botolph Lane*, a little white cottagey lane facing into another shrubby churchyard is, like *St. Edward's Passage*, an altogether insignificant street in itself; but, in the conditions of today, it is the best foil of its small kind remaining in the university-town—a measure of how far the rest of the town has gone.

These are the few small streets within the central triangle that have kept some townscape value. Outside, *Jesus Lane* makes its contribution on the east, and *Silver Street* a somewhat dull and colourless one on the west.

And that is all.

\* Trinity College has more recently done something of the same sort on the west side of Trinity Street. Another development which can be praised, and one which is a rebuilding not an adaptation, is the King's College residential building in Peas Hill, by The Architects' Co-partnership—an example of a rebuilding of a small-unit frontage in a completely modern manner which nevertheless sits well in the university-town street-scene.



The rest is town (any town: and rather poor town at that, for the most part) and university (19th century red-brick university even though it is supposedly light blue); town and university rather than university-town.

*Market Hill*, with the dun cliffs of the Guildhall, the white cliffs of Caius, the pink cliffs of St. Mary's Passage, and the strident vulgarity of the remaining commercial frontages, can only be described as a sad mess, unredeemed by the dull islanded church.

*Peas Hill*, which was a nice mixture of brick and stuccoed shops until the mid-1930's, has become Guildhall peas-pudding.

*Wheeler Street* and *Guildhall Street* have coloured bits left, but are far gone.

*Sussex Street*, which until 1930 was little country-town shops on one side, with over-sailing plaster fronts above, is a pompous crowded neo-Georgian set-piece.

*Hobson Street* can be written off as an irrecoverable dead loss.

*St. Andrew's Street*—*Regent Street* will not bear a second description.

*Pembroke Street*—*Downing Street* (with the exception of the short run of houses at the Trumpington Street end) is merely an unrelieved passage between college and over-large and over-long university buildings.

Even the little tortuous lanes among the colleges between the town and river are unrelieved and unfoiled by other kinds of buildings.

Not much remains of the Vice-Chancellor's university-town.

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So little remains, indeed, that the university-town can only be saved by deliberate measures being taken to keep what is left.

Of course, it has first to be decided whether the university-town *should* be saved. Another kind of town-centre can develop in its place. The town buildings can be allowed to consolidate and extend their already often over-great scale. Trinity Street, King's Parade and the rest of the good streets can be rebuilt with long commercial frontages. The few little lanes can be absorbed. The town can have a town-centre like a more crowded Wigan's or Watford's with the University (also more crowded) surrounding it. Or the University can more or less oust the town-centre, and a new one be provided elsewhere, leaving only a few book-shops, some tobacconists and a coffee shop or two among a solid mass of University and college buildings. Either of these things can happen if it is thought that it should—or even (especially the first) if there is no serious thought about whether it should or not. It will be an end of Cambridge as a university-town in the sense (the physical sense) in which that term has been used here. But it can happen like that. The possibility of having a Wigan-or-Watford-in-Cambridge town-centre is indeed already in process of being realised, not by way of a decision that it should, but in default of one that it should not. And the second possibility, the University's take-over bid for the university-town, would seem to be a not unlikely consequence of plans which have recently been advocated on the University's behalf.



The University, the City Council and the County Council have all, on numerous occasions, expressed the hope and intention of maintaining Cambridge as a 'university town'. It has been uncertain whether, in the expression of these hopes, the 'university town' has been thought of in the social or the physical sense. But it is not unreasonable, in view of what has been happening, to doubt whether there has been any clear realisation at all of the meaning of the term in relation to the physical character of the place. So it may not, perhaps, be over-emphasising what should be obvious, to point out that while the social and physical characteristics are, of course, closely linked, they are not necessarily wholly interdependent. The university-town could continue in its social sense after every vestige of its special physical character had been lost. The question at issue is whether it is important that the *physical* character of Cambridge as a university-town should be maintained. It is *that* question that must be settled now, before the consideration of it is invalidated by default.

For my own part, I can only express my conviction that it is this physical character, this very special kind and quality of townscape which is shared with only two or three other places in Britain and with very few, if any, in the rest of the world, this tangible and visible expression of the historical and present association of town and university in the university-town—it is my conviction that it is this particular physical quality, even if it is already diminished and mutilated, which is the essential characteristic (after the romantic landscape of the Backs) that people carry in their minds as their image of Cambridge as a university-town. It is also my conviction that, without it, not only would England suffer a serious loss, but so would the University and the town themselves.

I have been at some pains to make it clear that the physical character of the university-town depends on the physical contrast between the interpenetrating elements of the two constituent parts. I have referred to the contrasting, the foiling, the enlivening interplay between the University (and college) buildings and the rest. It is quite simply upon this interplay (as it appears to me), that the special physical character of the totality which is described by the term 'university-town' depends.

The terms 'character' and 'scale' in this connection are so closely connected as to be nearly synonymous. The 'scale' of the town buildings in relation to the university buildings is in a very large part determined by the 'character' of those buildings as small-unit buildings in contrast to large-unit buildings, and by the varying designs and surface treatments of the small-units standing ranged together, in comparison with larger, less dissimilar, less broken, more formal (or nearly formal) frontages of college and University buildings. This can perhaps be illustrated by saying that if, for example, there had been built at much the same time (say in the 18th century) a town and a university of moderate size with inter-penetrating buildings in similar formal design and similar materials, such a town, however impressive and however beautiful it might have been, would not be what we mean by a university-town. It is not only the interpenetration of the university and the town, but the enlivening interplay between the intermingling





Fig. 2—Trinity Street





Fig. 3—King's Parade



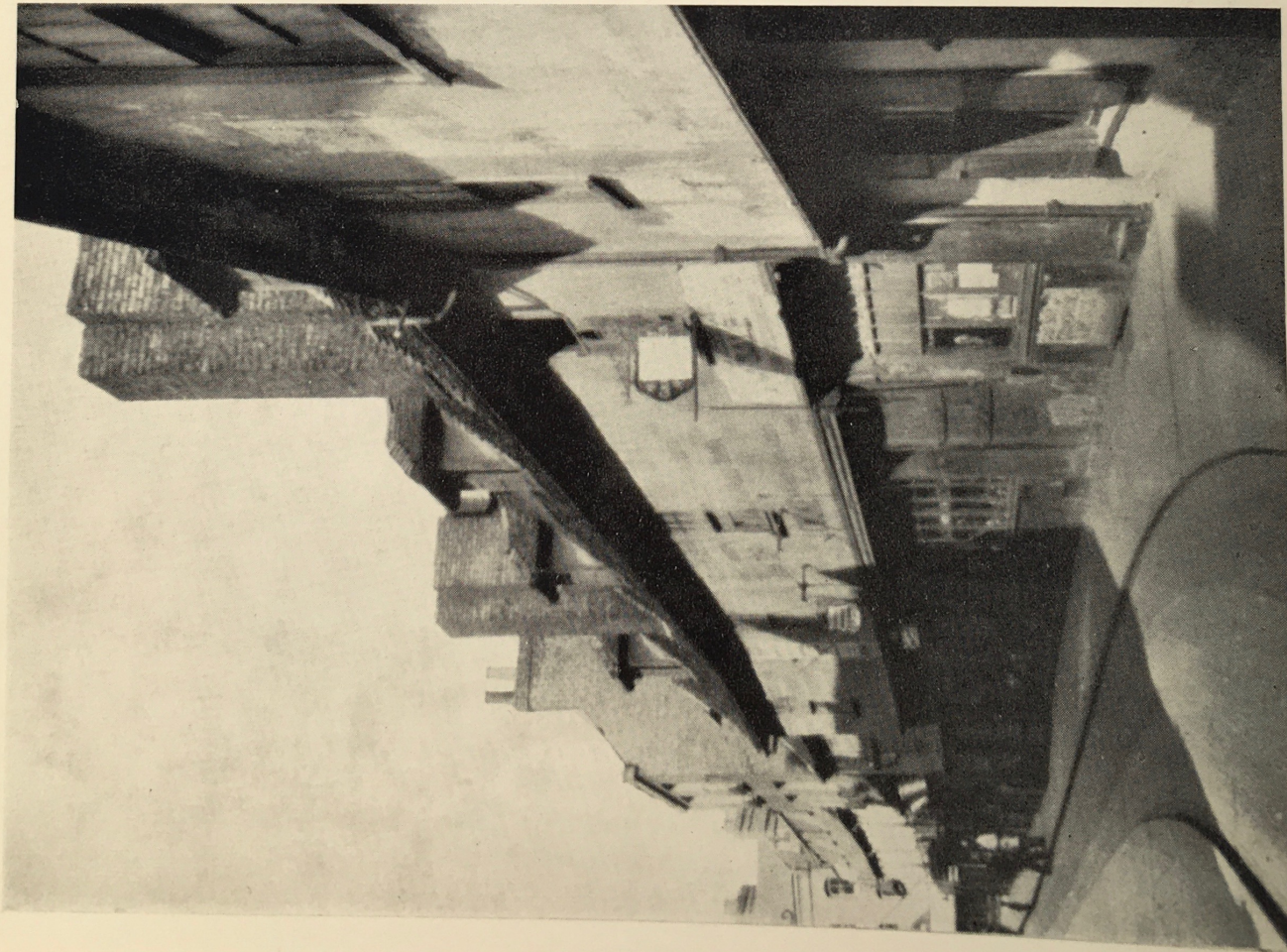


Fig. 4—Sussex Street before rebuilding

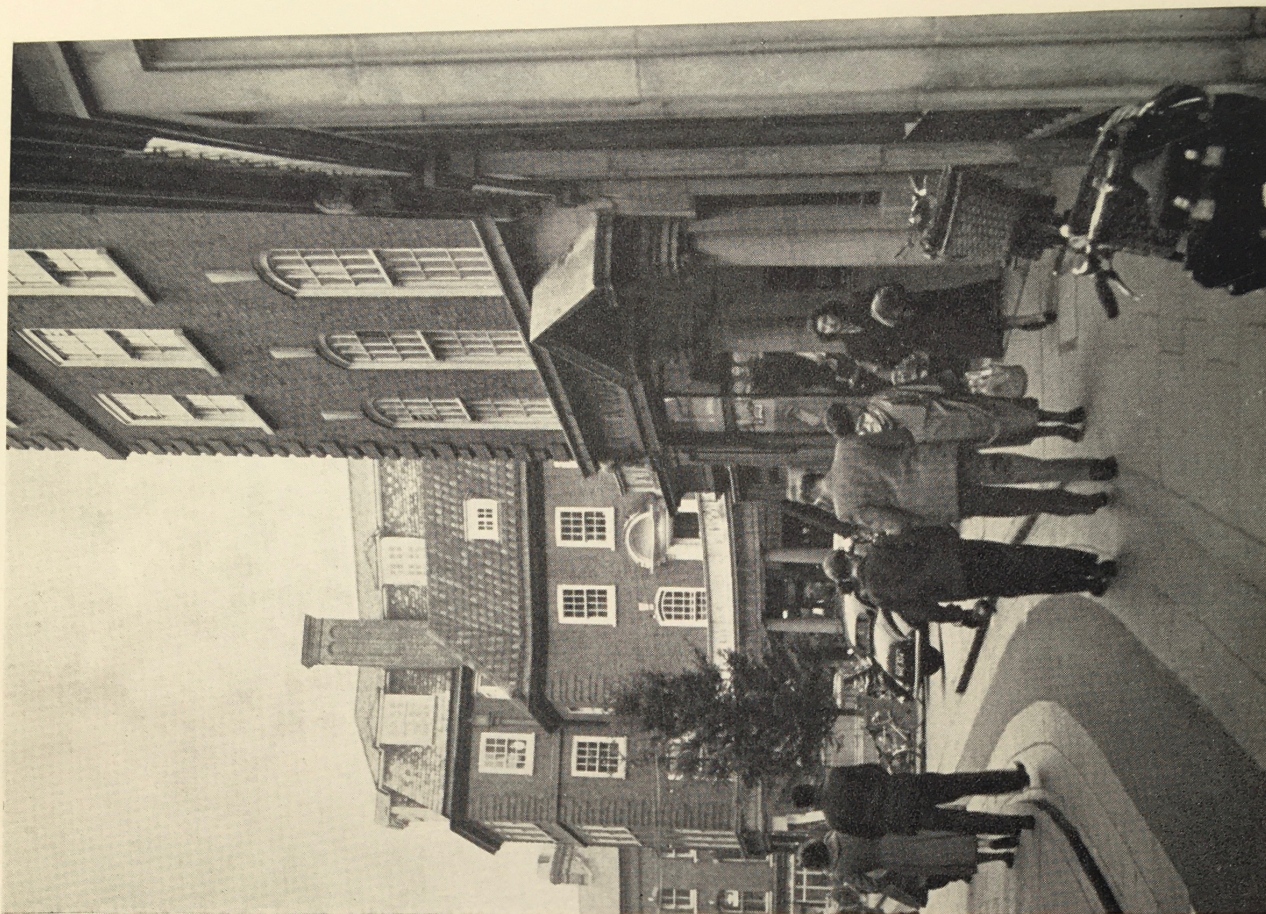


Fig. 5—Sussex Street, rebuilt 1930





Fig. 6—Sidney Street before rebuilding



Fig. 7—Sidney Street rebuilt 1928





Fig. 8—Market Hill before rebuilding



Fig. 9—Market Hill, rebuilt 1936





Fig. 10—Peas Hill before rebuilding



Fig. 11—Peas Hill, rebuilt 1936





Fig. 12—St. Andrew's Street—Emanuel Street, before rebuilding

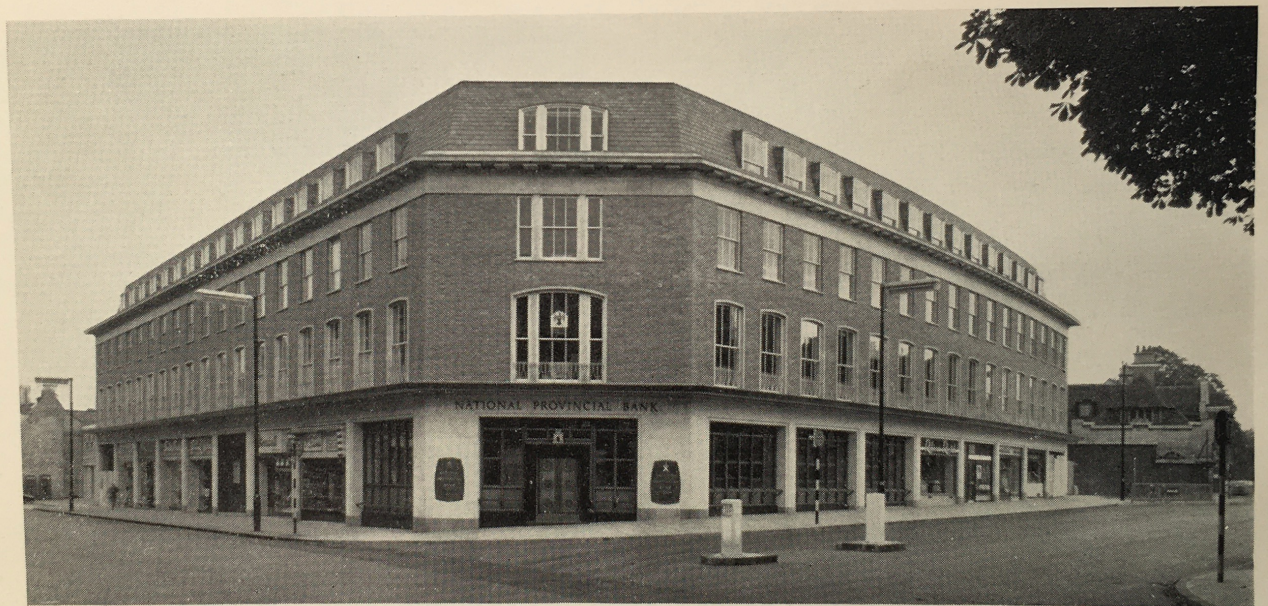


Fig. 13—St. Andrew's Street—Emanuel Street, rebuilt 1958



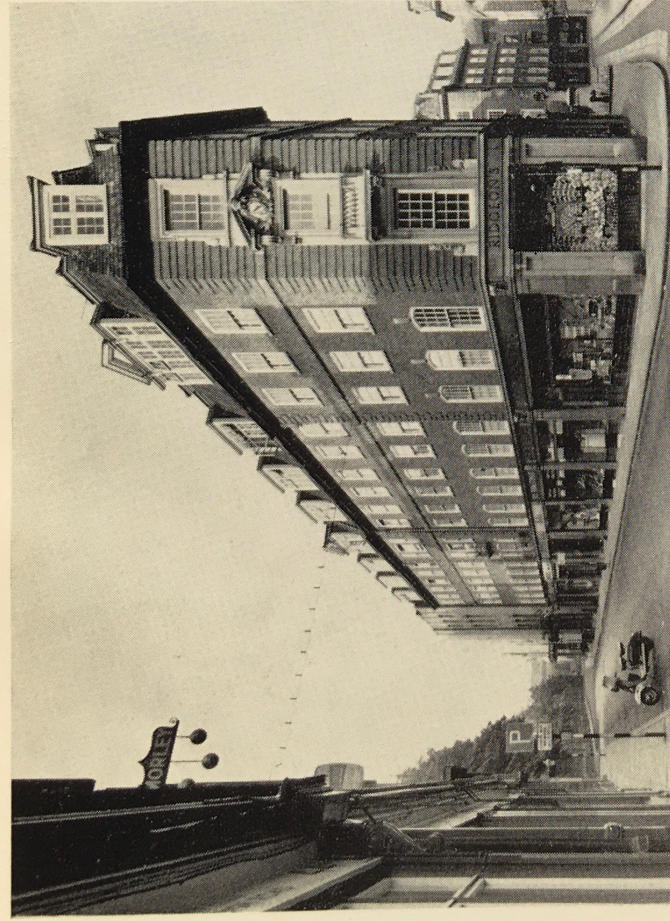


Fig. 14—Hobson Street Queen Anne, 1930

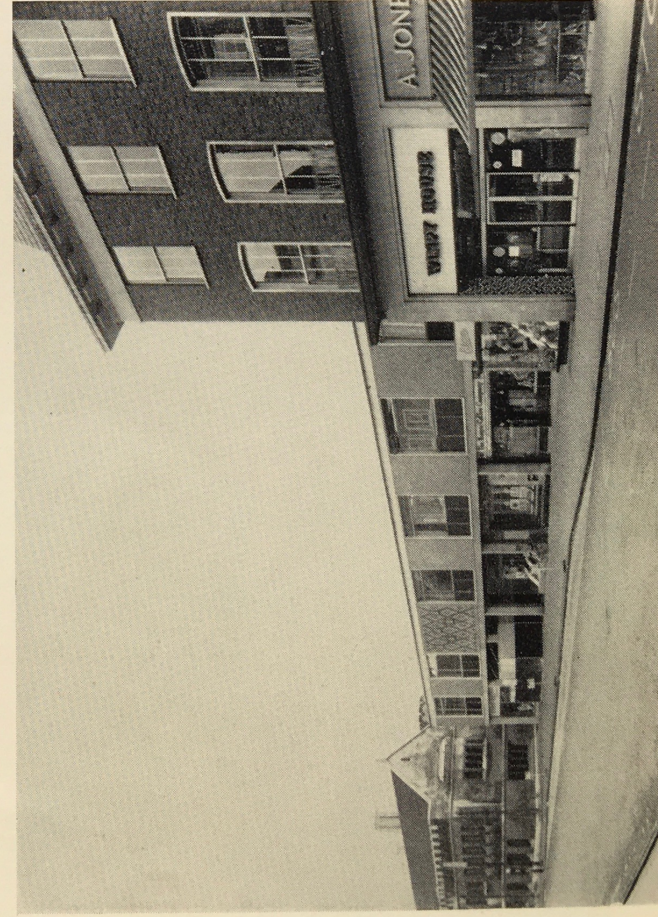


Fig. 16—Bradwell Court, 1961

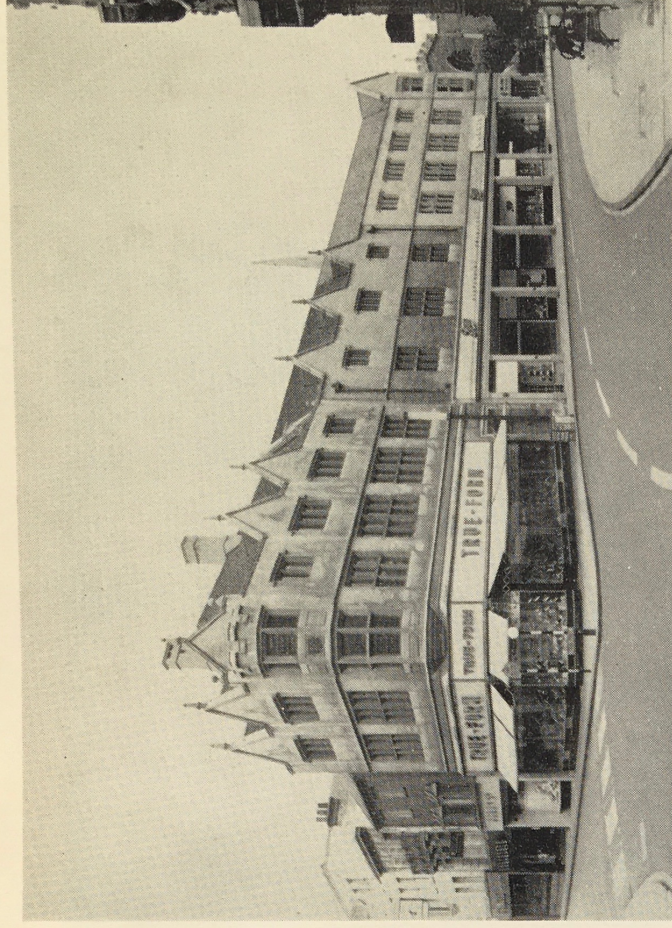


Fig. 15—Sidney Street Fenland-Cotswold, 1939-62

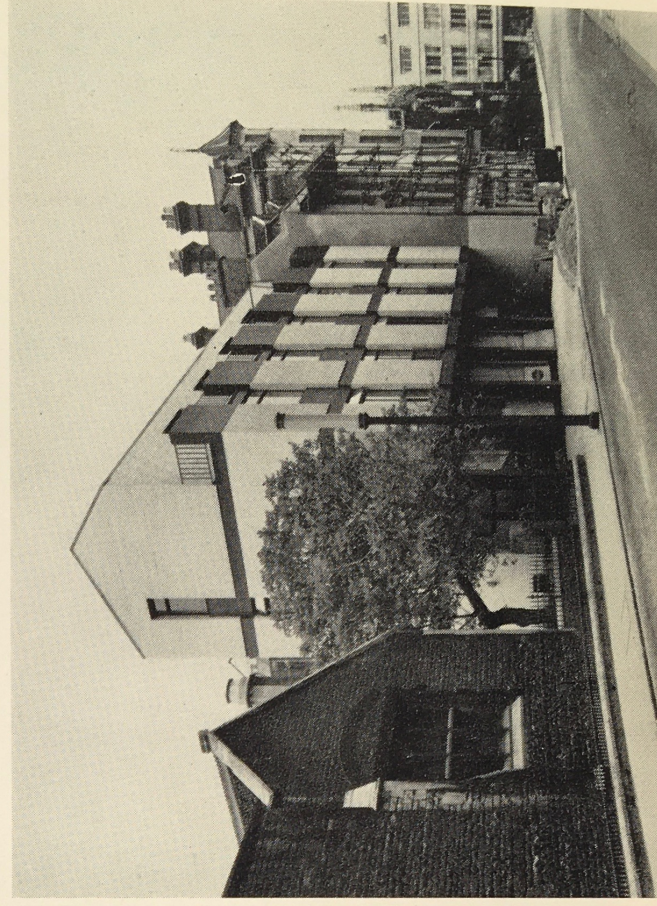


Fig. 17—King's College Residential building, Peas Hill, 1962



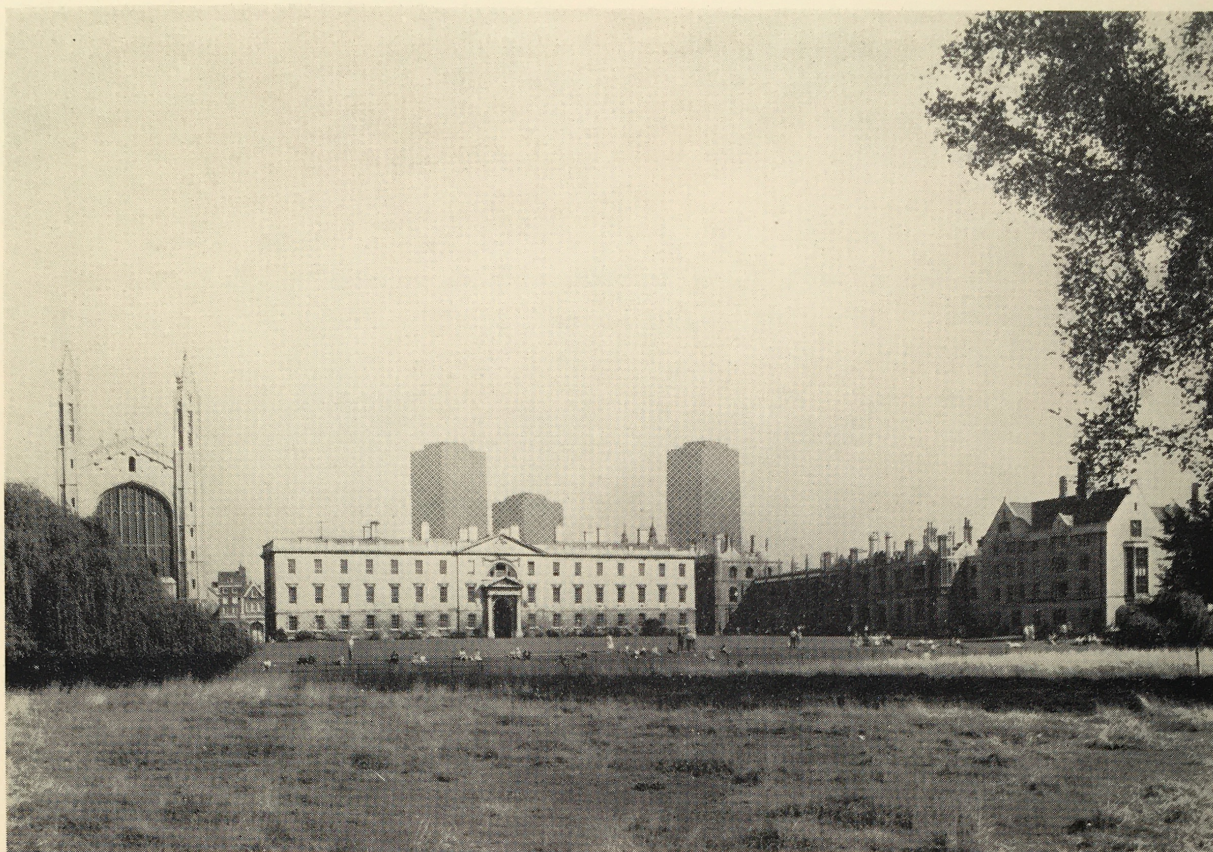


Fig. 26—King's College, with towers, from The Backs

Note. Two 200ft-high towers and one 150ft-high tower, where seen, have been superimposed on this and the following photographs to indicate some of the effects on Cambridge if such towers were built on the New Museums Site. They are not intended to indicate any actually proposed architectural treatment of such towers.

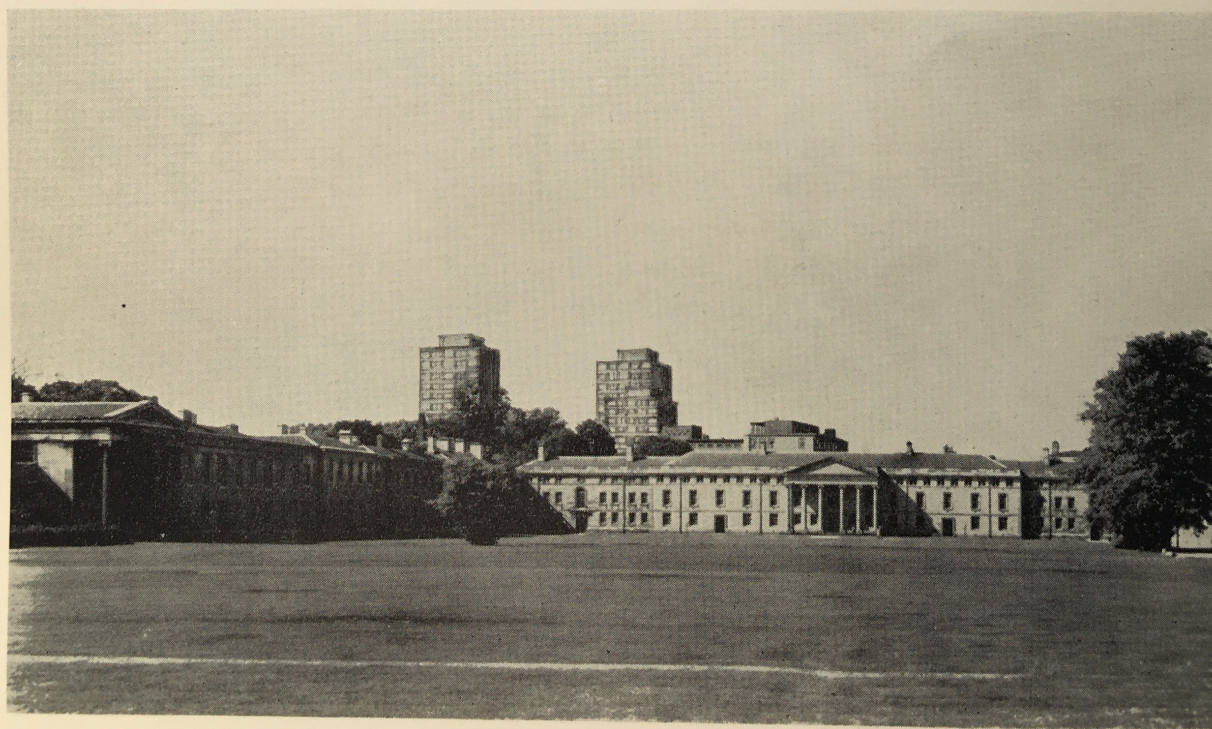


Fig. 27—Downing College, from its grounds.



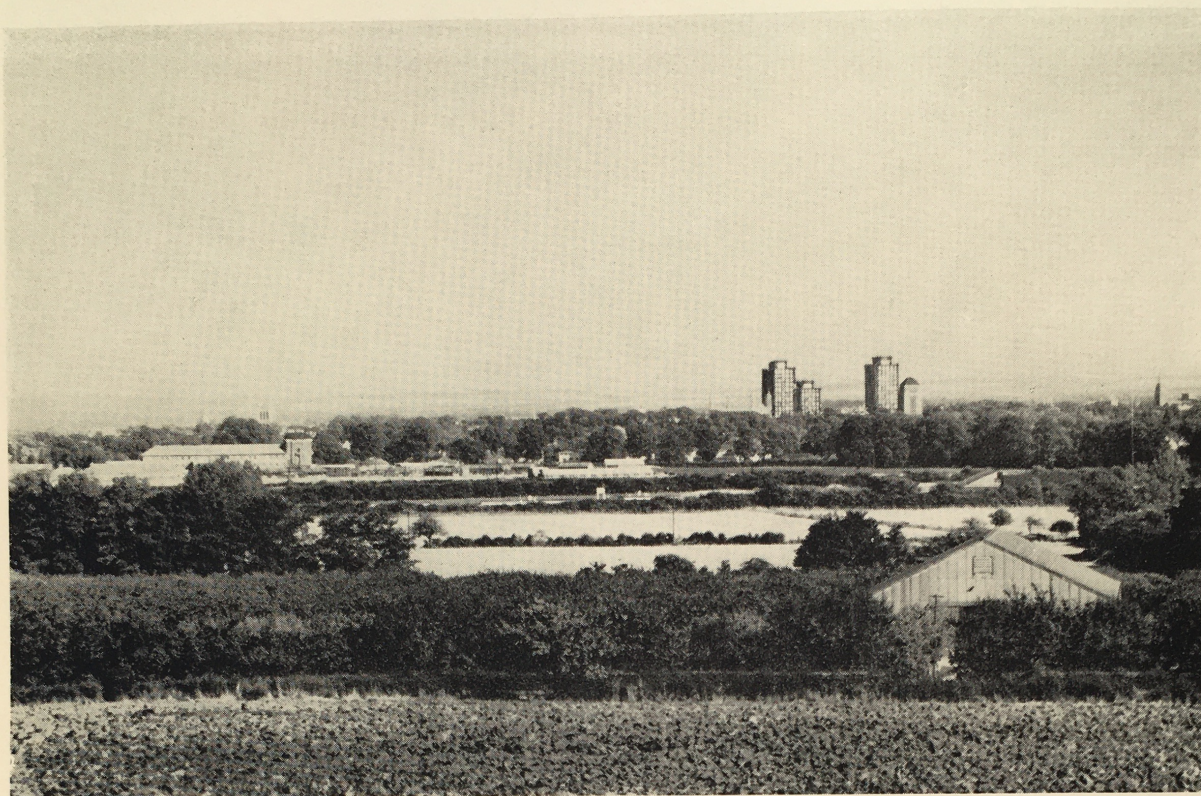


Fig. 28—From Madingley Hill



Fig. 29—From near Barton



buildings that produces the university-town as we understand it. And, because there are so few examples of that kind of town, as well as for the sake of the place itself, it is a matter of a far more than merely local need that university-town Cambridge should be kept in that character.

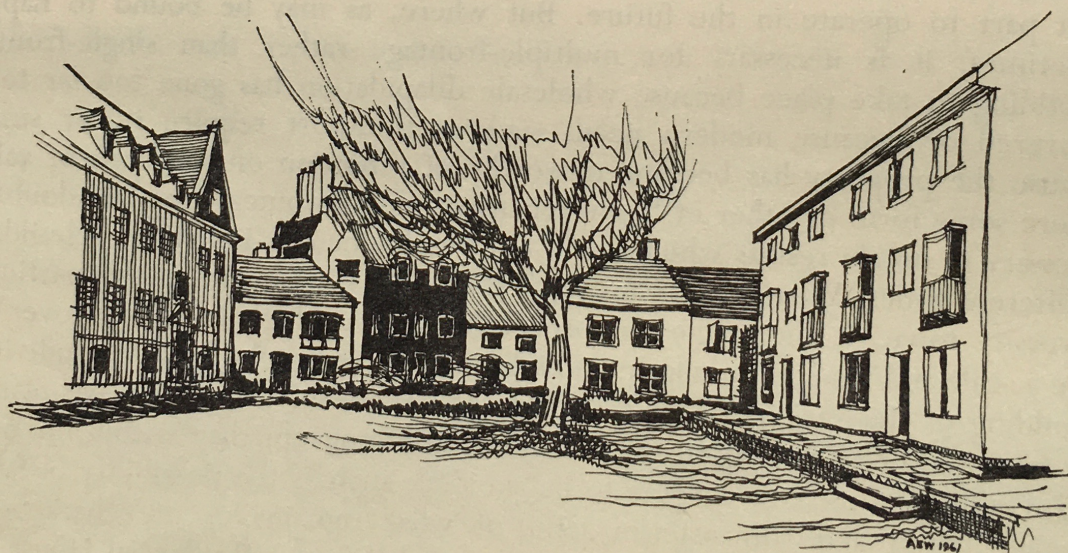
What that means is that no increase in the scale of buildings by virtue of increased height, and particularly no substantial increase by extension of frontage length, should be permitted in the present town-centre as I have been referring to it here. And what the latter part of that principle, in turn, means is that 'comprehensive redevelopment' in the sense in which it is ordinarily used and understood today should be avoided. It is this kind of 'comprehensive redevelopment' that has produced the new Sussex Street, the Queen Anne cliffs of Hobson Street, the Fenland-Cotswold of the new part of Sidney Street, the monumental pomposity of Prudential House. There is a looming danger that it may produce the same kind of result in Petty Cury. Of course it is necessary to have a broad policy and plan for such rebuilding as must take place. But in Cambridge at least, and probably in most country towns also, the variety, the complimentary contrasts, the enlivening interplay that characterise the townscape of the commercial streets cannot be caught where long frontages are rebuilt as in the 'comprehensive redevelopment' which has hitherto been practiced. A new understanding, perhaps even a new concept, is required here. If 'piecemeal redevelopment' has become a dirty phrase in the town-planning dictionary, it was nevertheless this kind of development which produced the effects that are so often delightful in the towns and cities of the past: and it is this kind of redevelopment (guided now through control in a time of uncertain values) that must, and should, continue for the most part to operate in the future. But where, as may be bound to happen sometimes, it is necessary for multiple-frontage rather than single-frontage rebuilding to take place because wholesale dilapidation has gone too far to be recovered or because modern needs such as transport require it, or simply because the property has become unworthy of retention on any scale of values—here some form or other of 'comprehensive redevelopment' may no doubt be necessary to obtain results which could not be obtained by individual rebuildings at different times. What is to be avoided, then, in what remains of this particular university town, is the single comprehensive *design* which is applied over too large a scale and too long a length: and what should be sought for is the individual rebuilding of the various frontages within the required comprehensive plan. It may be far less easy to operate within this kind of concept than within the other (and it will have its own dangers to be avoided, such as the possibility of falling into affectation and romanticism). But if what remains of the character of university-town Cambridge is to be retained and if future Prudential Houses are to be avoided, it is only by working on something along lines such as these that that is likely to be achieved.

Even outside the town-centre it is, of course, desirable that regard should be had to a sufficient degree of diversification. For the old university-town area it is, in my view, vital. It is vital, in the full sense of being necessary to its



continuing life as the special kind of place which it hitherto has been—a place which, in spite of what has been happening to it during this century, is still, along with at most two or three others, all but unique among the cities of Britain and of the world.

The choice, indeed, lies exactly there. There can be further redevelopment by large-scale large-unit buildings—and a Cambridge which, whatever else it may be, is no longer a university-town. There can be small-unit buildings where they are now (the good ones maintained, the dull ones enlivened and the bad ones, let us hope, better rebuilt)—and what is left of the character of Cambridge-the-university-town preserved. In the end it is, in my view, as straight forward an issue as that.





## II

In the foregoing analysis I have set out some general considerations on the character of Cambridge. I have not referred, except in general terms, to one individual aspect of modern building which is, or should be, of grave concern everywhere, and especially in a city like this. I have left it for separate consideration because it needs examining in detail rather than in a general way, and because it must, in the fortunate absence so far of specific examples here, be studied first in other places before its effect in Cambridge in particular can be properly appreciated. The problem is that of the height to which new buildings should be permitted to rise.

Hitherto, over all the hundreds of years of their existence roof-lines have been of much the same level throughout the extent of each town, increasing a little towards the centre as it has grown larger. Now, suddenly and astonishingly, within the last year or two a dramatic change has come about. In the larger cities great towers and slabs of buildings have begun to appear, riding high over the general roof level and dwarfing even the spires and church towers which have until now held dominion in the lower sky. They are beginning to appear in the smaller towns and cities also. And even in quiet little country towns that are hardly bigger than a large village.\* Even villages themselves have their projected tower buildings. Towers have become the latest building fashion.

Fashion, the latest mode, is a term which accurately describes them. They are a new thing, a novelty (though quite old hat in the New World), and, since architecture is today of all professional activities the most subject to fashion, the natural ambition of every architect is to build a tower wherever he can get the opportunity to do so. New materials, new techniques of building, have made it easier than before to build high: and it is, therefore, proper and desirable to build high—so the argument runs, if argument it can be called. And so the new fashion for high buildings, for doing something merely because it can be done, and because in doing it the designers and their clients get a glow of personal satisfaction regardless of wider considerations—so the fashion for towers and slabs, and particularly for towers, has begun, almost before the majority of people have realised it, and certainly before its full implications have been considered, to hump and lump about our urban skylines.

One of the characteristics of fashion is that it may turn out to be only temporary. But the results of this particular fashion will be all too permanent. The fashion may change, but the buildings will remain. A year or two of this kind of building can alter irretrievably the effects that have been created in our towns over centuries. Never before has it been possible to effect so much change in so short a time, and by a single building. Cambridge itself, as I have said, has so far escaped damage—but only just. Within recent months the University (of all bodies) has proposed to erect three tower buildings, two rising to over 200 ft. and one to 150 ft., on the New Museum's site in the very centre of the town; and

\* As at Henley, where a 15-storey tower of flats is being built on a hill above the town.



though it has temporarily withdrawn that proposal in view of its rejection by the local planning authority, it may very well press it again, or propose something like it. At much the same time there has been under consideration at another place, at Oxford, a proposal for a tower building rising 260 ft. into the sky for a purpose no less distinguished than housing the animals used in zoological experiment and research—a sort of aerial rabbit warren. This again has been defeated—though only after formidable lobbying and controversy. So Oxford, too, has been temporarily saved from the current fashionable fate of other towns. But that these proposals should have been seriously made in places like these, and that their realisation should only just, for the time being, have been avoided, shows how strong an appeal the new fashion is making even in the most unexpected quarters.

Of course, a new fashion need not necessarily be a bad one. It may indeed be a very good one. Old towns, as well as new, must accept new ways of building and new kinds of building. New forms should not be ruled out merely because they are unfamiliar. But neither should they be accepted merely because they are novel. And because this particular fashion can have such permanent results, it is especially necessary to consider how far the conditions which have created it are sound, how far the acceptance of those conditions is desirable in its effect on the design of individual buildings, and whether or not this effect is acceptable in the total creation, the town, which the individual buildings collectively make. It is astonishing to think that these matters have not yet been given any serious consideration; but it is difficult to believe that they have, in view of what has been happening in the last few years. It may be that they have been ignored because they may seem humdrum and sober against the architect's intoxication in building monuments to himself and his clients. But dull and restrictive though they are they are infinitely more important than the excitements of architectural megalomania.

\* \* \*

To begin with, then, there is the argument that we should build high because it has become easier to do so. This in itself is clearly fallacious if it ignores the effects of the buildings which result. It would, nevertheless, be held to be strongly in their favour if economic and similar arguments could be produced in support of high buildings—if it could be shown, for example, that the new materials and new techniques which make building high more readily possible also make it so much cheaper that it is essential in the general interest that we should build that way.

But that is not so. Comparative costs of commercial buildings in high towers and in horizontal structures are hard to come by: but comparative costs for the building of flats are available. It is known, for example, that the construction costs per square foot of floor space are about 40% more for eight-storey buildings than for three-storey buildings; and about 50% more for twelve-storey buildings.



They are some 30% and 40% more, respectively, for eight-storey and twelve-storey buildings as against four-storey buildings where lifts are not installed. They are over 20% more for eight-storeys and some 25% more for twelve-storeys, as against the five storeys at which lifts become indispensable. Even the maintenance and service costs of an eight-storey building are 36% more than those for a three or four-storey building of the same floor area. And it has to be remembered that, though proportionate construction costs do not rise progressively to the height of a building, they do, nevertheless, rise steadily with each additional storey. So that, at the twenty-five and thirty storeys at which flats are now beginning to be built, the cost may perhaps be between two-thirds and three-quarters as high again as against those of three or four-storey buildings with the same accommodation in the more normal horizontal form.\* If these are the figures for flats, those for offices and other uses in tower buildings must not be entirely dissimilar, and it is clear from them that the high fashion is also an extremely expensive one.

Another argument advanced in favour of building high is that it saves space. It is held that it keeps the town compact, and so lessens urban encroachment on the countryside. This again is not so. It would no doubt be so if the only consideration were to get as much accommodation as possible on to every piece of land. But that would simply be urban anarchy. There are other considerations, even in relation to mere convenience, let alone in relation to visual amenity—considerations of light, air, the right to some sky, the generation of traffic, the parking of vehicles, the effects of over-concentrating people in one small area, and so on and so on. To safeguard these considerations, statutory town planning schemes very properly impose controlling regulations on the occupancy of space. For houses and flats the control is generally (and mistakenly†) imposed in terms of population—such and such a number of persons living on each acre. For other types of building it is generally in terms of site-occupancy in relation to floor-space—a ‘plot ratio’ which lays down that a site can accommodate a prescribed maximum amount of floor-space in buildings in proportion to the size of its total ground area. Building in the centre of Cambridge, for example, is limited by a plot ratio of  $2\frac{1}{4}$  to 1 which means that a site can contain  $2\frac{1}{4}$  times as much floor space as it has ground area. This in turn means that, other regulations permitting, the whole of the site can be covered by a two-storey building rising to three storeys over quarter of the area; or a nine-storey building can be erected over quarter of the site, the remaining three-quarters being left open: and so on. In these proportions of site coverage an eighteen-storey building, for example, could occupy an eighth of the site. But at whatever height the building may be erected, the controlling formula of floor space in proportion to site area remains.

\* Figures based on tables in papers by (1) P. A. Stone; *Economics of Housing Urban Development*; Journal of Royal Statistical Society (Series A), vol. 122, pt. 4, 1958; and (2) Nathaniel Lichfield; Journal of Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors; Sept. 1960.

† Mistakenly, because it is impossible to control house occupancy in bulk. It can be done in relation to public health standards for individual premises—but that is a different matter: a matter for public health laws, not for town planning laws. The town-planning control would be better in terms of living-space, but specifying room rather than floor space i.e. such and such a number of habitable rooms per acre.



It is much the same with the other method of controlling the occupancy of space—that relating to houses and flats. It is true that here very dense site occupancy may only be achieved by building high—the kind of occupancy which is achieved in the grossly over-crowded parts of central London where a density of up to 200 persons or rooms per acre is permitted. But no one concerned with reasonable conditions of living defends such densities except in the circumstances prevailing in such a situation—and many maintain that they are indefensible even there. Even for large cities the generally accepted maximum density outside such exceptional circumstances is half that—at 100 rooms per acre. And that density in no way, in itself, brings very high buildings into being. It can be achieved indeed without any building rising to more than four storeys in height.\* But even 100 rooms per acre is generally held to be too high except for the middle ring quarters of large cities: and, for most towns, the proper maximum housing density is generally about 70 rooms per acre. This is the maximum density generally accepted in Cambridge for rebuilding, though variations in excess of that figure have been accepted over comparatively small areas. To achieve it no building need of necessity be more than three storeys high: and if it *is* built higher the maximum density remains and no more accommodation or population can be got on to the ground because of its being so.

From this it is clear that the contention that building high lessens the town's encroachment on the countryside is untrue so far as mere area is concerned. It is also clear that it saves no ground space at all in terms of the town as a whole.

What it *can* do is to free a proportion of *site* space. This is what happens in the examples quoted above, where it was said that on a site with a plot ratio of  $2\frac{1}{4}$  to 1, the building might be one covering quarter of the site to nine storeys or one of eighteen storeys over one eighth of the site, and so on. In this sense it is obvious that the higher the building, the greater is the amount of free unbuilt-on space for use as gardens, car-parks and other purposes at its base.

This theoretical advantage is rarely, if ever, exploited by high buildings in town centres—for the obvious reason that it involves the loss of valuable building frontage at street level. The general form of building in these instances is a one-or-two storey *podium* of shops and similar establishments covering the whole site, with a tower building rising above part of this, the only 'freed' space being roof space which, in the English climate at any rate, is of very little use to anyone. For the general appearance of the town at ordinary level it may be as well that this is so, for a city of towers standing in windy detachment is unlikely to be either very attractive or very convenient. But whether that is so or not, the fact remains that this alleged advantage of building high is rarely, if ever, exploited in commercial quarters.

In residential quarters it is exploited more often. And there is some force, in relation to each individual site considered independently, that it should be so

\* See *Flats and Houses: 1958*: published by H.M.S.O. for the Ministry of Housing and Local Government, where an example in design, at 100 rooms per acre, shows 26% of the rooms in 2 storey buildings and 74% in 4-storey buildings.



where high density development is undertaken. In the more normal maximum densities, however, outside the central and near-central areas of great cities—*i.e.* at densities of 70 rooms per acre and less—it is highly questionable both from the public and from private interests whether common open grounds are more satisfactory than private gardens of even very small size. And, in any case, even where high buildings may to some degree be defensible for limited private reasons in that they free ground space within their own site, they do that at the expense of the sky to which nearby lower buildings also have a claim. So that in at least an equal degree they are, in that, against the public interest. Moreover, they have hitherto frequently been sited adjoining public open spaces. Many of the tower blocks of flats in public housing in London, for example, have deliberately been sited on the boundaries of parks, heaths and commons, so that their inhabitants may enjoy the benefits of those areas both in the views from their windows and in the use of their ground. Indeed, the overcrowding of these developments has generally been tolerable only because of the immediate proximity of these open spaces. In this way they have been dependent on borrowed space—and in this they have not been defensible.

Besides using borrowed space and borrowed sky for their own strictly individual purposes, high buildings steal that space and that sky—a widely extended and not merely local sky—from the rest of the town. And, in stealing them, they are far more likely than not to injure them, and consequently the town as a whole, in the further sense in which it is now necessary to consider the matter, namely in the sense of architectural and amenity values.

\* \* \*

Considerations of architectural and amenity values are important in all towns and cities. In a town like Cambridge they are of vital concern. And besides the visual effects themselves, the social implications of those effects must also be considered.

First there is the effect of a tower building, or a group of tower buildings, on the immediate surroundings. Here the result is bound to be great. A tower building is bound to affect the scale of the buildings that are seen with it. If these buildings have been designed along with the high building to make a composite and self-contained whole, the general *local* effect may (depending of course on the quality of that design) be impressive in itself. But this can rarely happen in the central area of an existing town. There, almost invariably, a tower building will be *imposed* on its setting. And the almost invariable effect, when it is, will be that of over-bearing ill-neighbourliness, the self-assertive domination of one element that bears no relation to and has no care for the rest of the members of the community of buildings round about. It is then a kind of architectural gangsterism.

The difference in effect, between the tower-building which is designed as part of a rare composite whole and that which is not, can be seen in two recent developments in the same quarter of London. The Shell tower building (whatever one may think of its design in the narrowly limited architectural sense, and



whatever its effect on the wider parts of the city outside its immediate setting) may perhaps be regarded as having something at least in its favour, in the purely local sense, in that it is one element in a deliberately designed and large-scale composite whole. In contrast, the Vickers tower, further upstream on the opposite embankment, though a far better building in itself, is essentially an anarchic building of the most aggressive type, lifting its great height up into the sky regardless of the Tate Gallery next door, the Houses of Parliament a few hundred yards away, and any of the near and far buildings and streets from which it can be seen.

Another London tower-block, or set of tower-blocks, illustrates the effect that this kind of building is bound to have on any street to which it is applied. Victoria Street may not have been a street of much architectural distinction. But it did have a certain character, a cohesion, a specific form—the character and cohesion of a *contained* canyon-like metropolitan street. Now at its western end it has no cohesion character or specific form at all. There are the two-storey *podia* which tower-blocks are always given in English town centres; and above them, at right angles to the street, there rise high slabs and a great tower against a tattered skyline. The street has gone (and the old scale of distances associated with the street); and in its place there is something which bears no recognisable relation to the street line or to the buildings which are left along it.

These two tower buildings serve also to illustrate other effects—effects which are felt far beyond their own locality. The Vickers building offers a warning example of how a tower-building can unexpectedly dominate a scene so far distant as to be thought quite beyond its influence. St. James's Street is a mile away from it. But where, before, it was a self-contained street (one of London's best) running down from Piccadilly to St. James's Palace with only the trees of the park seen beyond, now it is wholly dominated by that great tower a mile away rising straight into the sky beyond the Palace on the central axis—and not merely is it dominated visually, its once fine scale has been destroyed by that unvicarious and unwelcome but now all too permanent guest.

This kind of thing happens, of course—and it happens frequently and apparently unpredictably—simply because in a natural-grown city the street-system makes no regular and obvious patterns. On a simple grid-iron plan there are no architectural termini to street vistas: each vista merely wanders out into a hazy distance of sky above some far-away vanishing point. The buildings wall the interminable straight streets in, and most views of them are sidelong. So in, say, New York (and it is absurd how frequently New York is quoted in defence of these very different and differently-spaced London towers)—there, and in similar places, the street-picture is nothing like so much at the mercy of unconsidered incidents, whether near or far, as are the street-pictures in London, Cambridge and most European cities. Here on gently-curving, rapidly-twisting and totally-jumbled streets it is nearly impossible to tell in advance what the effect of a high building will be on the other parts of the town outside the building's own immediate locality.



And it is not merely the effect on streets. The Victoria Street towers, for example, dominate other urban vistas, as well. Over the roofs of intervening streets they intrude in a most powerful way into St. James's Park and Green Park, and have seriously reduced the scale and apparent size of these considerable open areas. The new Hilton Hotel tower at the hinge-point of the whole royal park sequence has had an even more extensive effect. It was the Shell tower, seen from the Serpentine Bridge that first among recent buildings usurped the sky in the view at the end of the long Hyde Park lake. It did so even though it is *three* miles away. But now the Hilton Hotel tower has stepped up, bigger and bolder and nearer at hand, and has altogether out-savaged the earlier savager.

With these buildings rising into the sky, the great scale and the whole character of the wonderful sequence of royal parks as London's *rus in urbe* has been changed. Something of the same kind has happened to that other royal park, Richmond Park, as well. There tower blocks of flats now bring the city into what until a few years ago, was a great stretch of semi-wild country without a sign of the vast *wen* which surrounded it. But then the same thing has happened also to many of the commons, the heaths and the public parks—the high buildings of London have reduced their scale and changed their character. It has happened incidentally and accidentally, of course. No one has intended it. Even the official planners had not realised that it would happen. But that makes it all the more sad—and all the more an object lesson for others to avoid.

The more distant country spaces as well as the internal urban spaces are affected in the same way. Where there are high buildings at the edge of a large town, or even at the centre of a smaller one, they proclaim the town from a distance, and in this sense heighten its visual encroachment on the countryside. It may be said that church-spires and cathedral-towers have done this for centuries. But there is a world of difference between a slim vanishing spire, probably in England, seen beyond trees, or the long nave and towers of a cathedral riding over the town roofs—there is a great difference between these and the high heavy chopped-off silhouette of today's tower buildings. There is a world of difference between dreaming spires (whether at Oxford or Cambridge or anywhere else) and teeming towers (whether occupied by flat-dwellers, office workers, dons, students or rabbits) and the difference is not merely an architectural one: it is one of profound social significance as well.

Which brings us to a final consideration. It is some decades now since anyone spoke much of the need for the observance of a social hierarchy in buildings. Once that was held to be a matter of high importance in civic design. In the fashion for tower building it has been forgotten or ignored. But it still, surely, must be a valid and proper concept unless our values have become wholly materialised. There is surely something offensive to spiritual values that the Victoria Street tower-block-complex of commercial offices should reduce to trivial insignificance the tall campanile of Westminster Cathedral which has hitherto occupied that part of the London sky. There is surely something offensive to social values that the headquarters of a single commercial company in the



Vickers tower should subdue both Westminster Abbey and the Houses of Parliament, and that another similar structure not far away (the Shell tower) should do the same to the government centre of London itself. There is surely something peculiarly offensive to human dignity that at Oxford it should be proposed that a tower occupied (even in part) by rabbits, mice and earthworms, should dwarf every other building in a city which in the past has made some not inconsiderable contribution (as even Cambridge will admit) to the development of the human mind and spirit. There is surely something unacceptably uncivil that a single tower of private flats should ride high over a whole small town, as at Henley.

In sum, it is surely wrong that one or more individual private interests should subdue the skyline of any town against the interests of the rest of the community. It is, of course, an excellent thing that the skyline should be diversified. It might perhaps be argued that it is less outrageous that it should be diversified by towers occupied by people than by the lumps of public utilities in gas-works, electricity works and such like, which so often dominate a town today—were it not that the towers themselves are generally as lumpish and even more dominating than those utilities. But the proper elements of diversification are surely still those associated with spiritual values, as in the slim church spires and towers, or at least with the general community, as in government buildings, according to the manner that has operated since towns were first created. And even if it is argued that our spiritual values have so far declined that the argument relating to them is no longer valid, the final contention remains that a minority of private interests should not be allowed to dominate the town architecturally any more than it should socially.

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Much of all this may seem to be a long way from Cambridge. But in the fortunate absence, so far, of any achieved manifestation of it here\*, it has been necessary to establish the arguments with regard to this new fashion in building by way of using, as illustration, actual examples of it which have already occurred elsewhere—and those in London are both the best known and the most apposite. Even so, since Cambridge is so much smaller, and so much more sensitive to wrong building than a great amorphous city like London (or Birmingham or Manchester or Leeds), even these illustrations are but an indication of what will happen should high tower-buildings be erected here.

It cannot be held that the Cambridge skyline is as fine or distinguished as might be expected from a place of this character. Nor is it anywhere to be seen to much advantage as a whole. Only from Madingley Hill, among public places, does one get a general panoramic view, and that somewhat too distant to be fully effective. Inside the town only Castle Hill provides a wide close prospect. And, as has been suggested earlier, the town is not particularly fortunate in its towers and spires. For the most part they were built or rebuilt at a time when English

\* Except, to some degree, the early one of the University Library: see later.



architecture was not at its best. Moreover, they are comparatively low and squat. Nevertheless, as it is important to protect any skyline, so it is especially important to protect the skyline of such a special place as Cambridge is.

Besides the skyline of the town generally, there is a whole range of skylines *within* the town—the skylines seen from the streets and open places. It has already been said that the skyline is particularly vulnerable in towns where the street pattern is irregular—and that means almost every town in England. It is so because it is so difficult as to be nearly impossible to judge beforehand whether or not, in all the various and varying street alignments, a new high building will unexpectedly emerge over intervening roofs at some street's slight change of direction, at some opening out of a street picture, or because of an incidental declivity in a road or a casual gap in a roof-line. The far formal termination of a street, and its immediate local reduction in scale by a distant object such as the Vickers building has produced on straight St. James's Street, may be unlikely to happen precisely in kind in Cambridge; but sufficient other possibilities could occur as to put anyone who cares for the town into a state of perpetual alarm and despondency—unless the possibility is in fact rendered impossible by some order or regulation which would prevent it.

The casual incidental and unexpected effects made by slim spires and church towers, or even by so considerable a structure as a dome, are, of course, among the main delights of townscape in a natural-grown town. But the effects created by lumpish tower-buildings are an altogether different kind of thing. It becomes, then, a matter of scale; a matter of volume. It becomes a matter of a resounding shout, as against the slight almost tentative architectural statement of a spire or the considered rounded phrasing of a dome. And how far and how powerfully the different kind of statement by a tower-building will resound and echo over the town is, as has been said, unpredictable.

When, a few months ago, the University proposed to build those three high towers on the New Museums site, a number of balloons were sent up to the heights to which it was proposed to build, so that some probable effects of the buildings could be judged. The indicated effects were sufficiently alarming to convince the Planning Authority that they should not be allowed to come into being. But even so they could only be of the roughest and most approximate kind, showing pin-pointed heights to which the buildings would rise, but little of the great bulk and overpowering scale which would be the main effect they would create. Nor could they fully indicate the extent of the impingement of the buildings on all the various street-scenes into which they would unexpectedly penetrate.

Some further slight impression of what the effect of these Cambridge tower-buildings would have been may be gained by using the tower of the University Library as a gauge. That building stands away from the town centre, backed by trees, and acts as the central dominant in a deliberately designed formal composition of related subordinate buildings. It is 160 ft. high and its bulk is 45 ft. by 45 ft. on plan. Even so, and even in this detached position, it is over-big for the



Cambridge scene. But two of the proposed tower-buildings were to be 200 ft. high on a 60 ft. by 60 ft. plan: and the other 150 ft. high on a plan of the same dimensions. Thus the two highest would have been a third higher than the Library Tower with two-and-a-third times its bulk: and the other of much the Tower's height and one-and-three-quarter times as bulky. Moreover, it is so likely as to be almost certain that, in some views, two, and probably all three of the towers would have so over-lapped that they would have read as one. It is difficult to understand how a proposal for buildings of this kind can have been made by an institution of learning whose Vice-Chancellor and members continue to speak of the market-town character of the place to which they intended to apply such treatment. It shows, in itself, how far the fashion for high building has gone. And it also shows what Cambridge must be prepared for unless the fashion is controlled.

These considerations relate to the skyline within the town streets. There is also to be considered the effect of tower buildings on the open places of the town. And this in Cambridge is at least as important a consideration. The town streets can be paralleled and perhaps even surpassed in a few instances elsewhere. But one feature that the town possesses is altogether unique. There is probably nothing quite like the Backs anywhere else in the world. If that unique piece of urban landscape were seriously affected by tower buildings it would be a disaster that would be a shame and a reproach to the town for generations to come. And it certainly would be so affected. The balloons which were put up by the University to show the height to which the University's towers would rise gave some *slight* indication of what their effect would be. The London tower buildings at Victoria and Park Lane provide *actual* examples in their lamentable effect on St. James's Park, Green Park, Hyde Park and Kensington Gardens. Any considerable bulk rising high above the general building level of central Cambridge would damage the Backs in exactly the same way. It would subdue them. It would bring the town right into the Backs. It would destroy their character as a very special and very romantic *rus in urbe*. It would disastrously reduce their scale. And it would have the same effect on the other open spaces which are peculiarly part of the Cambridge scene—Parker's Piece, Christ's Pieces and Midsummer Common. If these things, or anything like them were done, in spite of argument, they would not be forgiven; for not merely argument but actual example against them is available for all to see.

Besides these effects of tower buildings on the wider views of streets and open spaces, their effects on individual buildings can be of a ruinous kind. It would hardly improve the now majestic scale of King's College Chapel to have two buildings three times as high and another twice as high, rearing themselves up a few hundred yards away. Nor the calm serenity of the Senate House, nor the domestic scale of college courts, to have such towering giants as their neighbours. It may not matter much architecturally, what is done to the sadly undistinguished Guildhall or even to St. Mary the Great but it *is* of some importance that the historical buildings of a city whose name and fame is familiar throughout the



civilised world should not be reduced to insignificance by later buildings conceived without thought or consideration for anything but their own purposes.

If the Guildhall and St. Mary the Great do not matter much architecturally, they do matter, and all the other buildings of the town as well, in another not negligible respect. It has already been suggested that the hierarchy of buildings still demands that a town should not be dominated physically any more than socially by the buildings of one set of specialised interests in the community. The proposed University tower buildings have so far been referred to specifically only because it is the University alone, up to the present, which has made actual proposals to depart from the hitherto normal method of building. Even within the University itself the domination of the scene by buildings for one or two specialised interests would be hierarchically invidious. Why should a building for zoologists or biologists or engineers or scientists brow-beat and enormously over-top the buildings where history or literature or law or language or theology is studied? And if such physical domination is open to objection within a limited section of the community, it is far more objectionable within the community as a whole. One cannot but wonder whether the University, in proposing its three towers, considered at all what would have been its attitude if these towers had been proposed for commercial interests. It almost certainly would have raised indignant objections and have described the proposals as vandalism. Yet if the University should have its towers, so, equally, should commerce. For Cambridge is neither merely university nor merely town. It is university-town. And whether the towers are built by the University or by some other specialised interest, the effect on the streets, on the open spaces, on the historical buildings of the town will be the same.

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In all this I have referred mainly to high buildings in town centres. But the same arguments apply to such buildings in intermediate and suburban areas. It is often said that modern suburban skylines are monotonous and dull. And so they are. We should undoubtedly try to diversify them. In the absence of church spires and public buildings it may not always be easy to do so. The building of blocks of flats and maisonettes three or four-storeys in height, and even three-storey houses, rising above the normal two-storey houses, will greatly help—will, indeed, generally be sufficient. But the building of towering blocks and sudden high slabs will not. Such buildings will only appear wanton and overbearing. Diversification of the skyline is desirable, no doubt. But its possession by a few towering and lumpish buildings is not diversification: it is domination.

And here I can sum up the matter generally. Building in high towers or slabs serves no essential public or private purpose. It is more costly in mere money. It does not save land. If it sometimes frees ground-space it does so at the expense of other buildings' sky-space. It does not keep the town compact. It does not preserve the countryside, but, on the contrary, obtrudes upon it. It is



architecturally anarchic. It ruins the scale of surrounding buildings, indeed of a wide locality round about. It can produce unexpected and destructive effects on near and far street-pictures. It reduces the scale and injures the character of near-by open spaces. It is offensive in the architectural hierarchy of the town, subduing spiritual, cultural and civic buildings to insignificance. If it satisfies an architect's megalomania and his client's desire for prestige, these are not conditions which can be permitted to be achieved at the expense of a town. Of any town. Particularly not of a town of the character of Cambridge.

My own hope is that this university-town will not submit to a fashion which could ruin it by a single decision that would take but a few months to execute and could thereafter never be redeemed. As a result of all these various considerations that I have set out, I suggest, with a full sense of my responsibility in doing so, that no new utilitarian building higher than five normal storeys should be permitted anywhere in Cambridge.

### III

In sum, my recommendations to the Planning Authority, for the maintenance of the university-town character of Cambridge, are these:

1. Wherever possible, the remaining streets and individual non-university buildings in the town centre which are of value as 'foils' against the University buildings should be maintained in their present character.
2. In particular, the majority of the present buildings in St. John's Street, Trinity Street, King's Parade, Green Street, the north and east side of Rose Crescent, and Magdalene Street, should be preserved.
3. The 'foiling character' and the general diversification of these and the other central streets could be enlivened and enhanced by appropriate painting, as of window reveals etc.
4. Any rebuilding in the central streets generally should be by way of small-unit rather than large-scale frontages; and this should be achieved by carefully controlled designs within a broad policy and plan, rather than by an individual large-scale design for the whole, even if rebuilding has to proceed by way of 'comprehensive redevelopment'.
5. 'Tower-buildings' should be prohibited everywhere in the city, and particularly in the university-town locality.
6. In future, no building in the city should be permitted to rise higher than five normal storeys (excepting non-utilitarian architectural features such as spires and towers on such buildings as churches). This should be regarded as a maximum rather than a general height, even in the city centre, for there will be many situations there, as well as in most parts of the extra-central and suburban districts, where even that height will be inappropriate and buildings should be lower.